

British Mount Combatant Expedition Report



Summary

In August 2012 Peter Graham and Malcolm Scott travelled to the Waddington Range in British Columbia with the objective of climbing a new route on the Incisor buttress of Mount Combatant. Finding the approach and descent to be dangerously serac threatened, they changed objective and decided to attempt a new route on the Grand Cappuccino on Serra 2. They succeeded in making the second ascent of the Grand Cappuccino by a new route and link it to the unclimbed ridge behind to the summit of Serra 2.

Personal Account of the Expedition by Malcolm Scott

We arrived at Whitesaddle with a mix of emotions, mainly excitement and fear, it already felt like the absolute back of beyond but we were still yet to leave civilisation behind. We quickly negotiated our taxi ride with Patrick- a young pilot- and settled down for a night on the airstrip which we shared with a herd of cows. The next morning we loaded three weeks' worth of food, camping and climbing gear into the helicopter and took to the air. The journey passed quickly, a blur of beautiful scenery and relief that we weren't walking over it with close to two hundred kilos of stuff between us.



(Malcolm at White Saddle with our trusty Ford Taurus and the helicopter behind)

The helicopter deposited us on Sunny Knob- a stark alpine meadow, a safe haven flanked on three sides by vicious glaciers and on the fourth by the monolithic south ridge of Serra II. As suddenly as we had arrived, the chopper was gone and we were alone, surrounded by giants.

The heavy silence left by the helicopter did not last long as a house sized block of granite crashed down the hanging glacier to our west, less than a hundred metres away. This was quickly followed by a large serac fall on Waddington's massive north face. These cannons kept a constant rate of fire for the rest of our stay, day and night. We spent several hours sitting, taking in our vast surroundings. Normally you have a bit of a build-up to scenery this epic and without we were struck dumb.



The loneliness was lessened slightly by the discovery of some tents a short walk up the hill from ours, although empty when we found them, a few hours later four specks appeared on the horizon. These turned out to be three strong ladies from Squamish with a camera man in tow, nearing the end of their trip. They had just climbed the south ridge of Serra II, on which they had been planning to attempt a variation, an amazing sounding granite tower. An unexpected snow storm forced them to escape up the normal route, a fifteen hundred metre TD which sounded hard enough under the conditions. The girls also had some bad news: they had wanted to have a look at the Incisor as well but thought the approach was unjustifiably dangerous. When we had a look for ourselves a few days later we agreed- big crevasses, enormous bergschrund, serac threatened descent, lots of avalanche debris, bad scene.

We were a little disappointed by this discovery, but hardly surprised. We set about the search for a nice looking bit of rock to climb, one without any “chop” glaciers to negotiate and preferably with a nice unclimbed line. Our eyes were instantly drawn to the south face of the Blade, a massive clean sweep of wall almost overlooking sunny knob, it had one existing route up its right hand side but plenty of potential. Sadly, although it almost felt like you could reach up and touch the wall from the campsite, the glacier leading to it was reckoned to be impassable this year (a theme developing). We devised a cunning plan- a complete spiral round the east side of the mountain, descending from a notch to the west of the face.

Since there was plenty of other good looking climbing around the other side of the Blade, we decided to base ourselves by the Plummer hut for a few days. The only man made building in the entire range, handily located half way round the spiral. It would be good to get to grips with this unforgiving world before committing ourselves to a new route. We packed five days’ luxury camping gear (enough food and a sleeping bag each) and set off down onto the Tiedemann glacier’s endless fields of ice. As we crossed the crevasses guarding the south of the knob the massive, chaotic citadel of the Serras Cirque reared above us. From the campsite the first tower of the ridge hides many of its features, an Escher like maze of pinnacles, ridges and seracs. One feature in particular commanded our lustful stares, behind the first tower a second, more elegant structure, thrusting skywards. Impossibly narrow seeming, huge pristine walls guarded all visible sides. “That must be the Grand Cappuccino” came a murmur of breathy Cumbrian, “it says it’s unclimbed in the guide, must be hard- it’s a pretty obvious thing to try”. Food for thought certainly, but we had some unreasonably sized sacks, which sadly weren’t going to carry themselves up the thousand metres of sweltering snow slope to our beds.



(Malcolm slogging up to the Plummer hut)

The next morning we woke at four. The plan to climb Sundog, the only existing route on the south wall of the Blade giving us a chance to have a look at the approach and eye up any nice looking lines on the swathes of unclimbed rock. After a few hours slogging into an icy wind, scurrying round the odd crevasse, we reached the bergschrund which must be overcome to reach the notch. “I don’t like the look of that” came a whimper of posh-Scottish. A large overhang of dripping blue ice, draped in unstable snow, various ominous cracks emanated from its base. It was just past dawn and it was

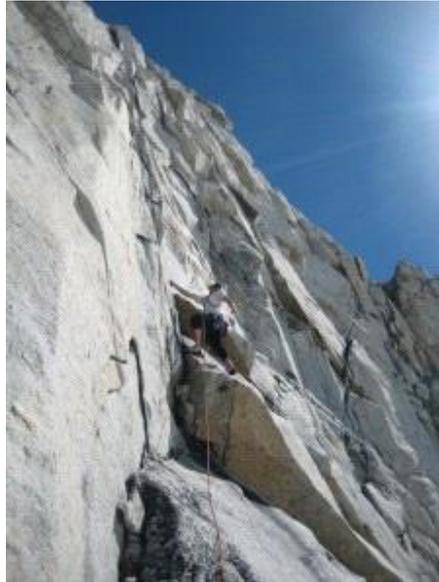
already melting fast. After a short consideration the day's plans were considerably downsized- a very pleasant route on the east side of the Blade, easier, shorter, with a nice safe approach and descent.



(On the summit of the Blade, with the Grand Cappuccino behind)

A team from Golden were staying at the hut, their stay overlapping ours by one day. Despite only just having met us, they invited us into the hut and generously shared whiskey and stories, an unexpectedly civilised evening.

Rising immediately to the east of the Plummer hut is a small but perfectly formed granite spire; the Claw. Feeling a little unsettled by the seriousness of our surroundings we thought we'd have a look at its (unclimbed according to the ten year old guide book) south face, the rock looked great and the approach and descent were straightforward. We thought it would be a good idea to try to get tuned in to on-sight new routing in the mountains. The start went well, we quickly made our way up the first hundred metres or so to a large diagonal terrace, above this the wall steepened and we spent a little while choosing which line to take. They all looked stellar and tough, so we chose the easiest looking. Sadly although it looked great the rock turned out to be less than ideal, a thin weatabix like "adventure layer" covered the surface and there were many car sized flakes which on close inspection turned out to be detached on all sides. We had a go anyway, but were unable to find a way through which we thought safe so, tails between our legs we returned to the terrace and traversed it to the classic and enjoyably mild south ridge. To climb stuff like that you either need to be very talented or very stupid. Sometimes it can be hard to tell the two apart but we were neither.



(Pete questing up the Claw)

It's fair to say we were feeling slightly disheartened, perhaps this place was just too gnarly for us? Maybe doing routes here required accepting a higher level of risk than either of us were prepared to? Still we had plenty of time left, all we could do was keep trying until either something clicked or we had to go home. Despite having not really achieved anything yet at least we felt like we had started to get the measure of the place. We radioed Whitesaddle for a forecast; unsettled for the next two days and then "splitter" for the foreseeable future. "Maybe we should just have it on the Cappuccino?" although it looked hard, as far as we could tell it was pretty objectively safe and from the Plummer it looked completely stunning. We stashed some food at the hut and returned to the knob to prepare ourselves.

A couple of extremely chilled days were spent hiding from the fierce sun and attempting (with some success) to fatten ourselves up. The evening before we left we were joined by an extremely friendly team of four from the U S A, they had big plans and seemed easily capable enough to be able to pull them off . We both felt a little sad to leave the now sociable campsite scene behind, as well as feeling pretty apprehensive about the days to come. The fact that we had been building up to this point for months hung over us, and we made the usual half successful efforts to diffuse our fears by trying to laugh at them. Although we were scared, it wasn't so much the fear of hurting ourselves as the knowledge that we were going to have to give it everything for the next three days, or even longer if forced to turn back near the top.



(Malcolm on lower south ridge of Serra 2)

We were determined to put safety first, in real terms this meant being prepared to run away if we found any unacceptable objective dangers, not committing ourselves to anything we couldn't reverse safely and taking enough food and survival gear that we could sit out any rogue storms that the forecast had missed. Of course there are still risks associated with this sort of thing, but there are with many aspects of life. And of course you have a greater chance of being killed on an alpine route than you do in a car crash, but not necessarily by orders of magnitude. The rewards given by alpine climbing can be incredible, the ultimate adventure! Both of us hold an incredible amount of value in the experiences we've had pushing it in the mountains.

Our plan was to climb the first thousand metres or so of Serra II's south ridge to a notch where we would spend the night. We would then try to find a way onto one of the Cappuccino's magnificent looking walls and climb to its summit. After this it looked possible descend to a fin which connects the north side of the pinnacle to the south ridge, and continue up this to the top of Serra II.

The first nine hundred metres went fairly smoothly, we found our own way up the ridge as the guidebook seemed reluctant to interfere with the adventurous nature of the place. There were a few little difficulties but nothing too desperate or scary until the last few rope lengths before the notch, where the rock quality took a turn for the worse. Nothing too terrible but the stress of heading into the unknown combined with the intense feelings of loneliness and the constant violent serac fall nearby meant we reached the bivi with somewhat shaken nerves.

The bivi site was the finest either of us had ever had the pleasure of finding on a route, comfortable room for two to lie flat, totally safe and with staggering, slightly menacing scenery. The east face of the cappuccino loomed above us, a continuously steep four hundred metre wall with some great looking rock, but some worryingly poised looking blocks guarded its lower pitches. The main event however looked to be the south face, which we had a tantalising glimpse of just before reaching the bivi. A slender square cut face, tapering slightly towards the top, completely devoid of any continuous features but clearly possible to climb, for someone if not us.



(Malcolm checking out the Grand Cappuccino from the first bivi)

As we settled down for the night, a little optimism seeped into our grateful brains. If you discounted the goings on within our minds, things had gone extremely well up to this point and although the climbing ahead would be hard, it looked pretty safe. As is often the way unfortunately a long dark night in such an austere environment, alone inside your head, takes its toll on such positive thoughts. The alarm clock pulled us from our half-sleep into a more foreboding environment. Still dark, writhing clouds enveloped the towers above us. We escaped from this menace, back into shallow slumber until daylight would allow us to assess the weather properly (a handy excuse).



(Dangerous loose climbing on the lower section of the Grand Cappuccino)

When daylight came the clouds had receded slightly, so after a quick brew we made a couple of abs down a couloir to the start of a ramp which leads to the south face. The climbing on the ramp was not difficult, but the rock was less than ideal and extreme concentration and care were needed to climb it safely. As we reached the base of the south face the clouds returned obscuring the potential lines.

We stopped for a while trying to figure out if we were brave enough to continue. “What are your thoughts then?” “I’m not sure, I’m getting an overwhelming sense of dread”. Heavy rationalisation followed. Our position wasn’t actually that bad, and climbing a few pitches wouldn’t make it much harder to reverse. The start of the left edge of the face had some features for us to hide in, and the eventually receding clouds showed that these continued- as far as we could see. That was it then.



(Malcolm on the fine upper section of the Grand Cappuccino)

A fierce wind whipped across the wall as we crept our way upwards, weaving between the nicest looking features. The climbing was magnificent, sustained, varied and a touch bold in places. The virgin nature of the rock demanded a completely controlled climbing style but this felt within our abilities. Suddenly everything seemed to be going quite well, after the choss nightmare leading to the terrace, chances of success had felt vanishingly slim. As if from nowhere we were gaining momentum. The previous months seemed to crystallise down into these precious few moments. All of the planning, research, preparation, training. The sustained level of fear and anticipation over the last few days, all of this boiled down to a few hours pushing into the unknown. Climbing onsight, pristine golden granite on a savagely beautiful mountain. The feeling was quite surreal, the wind continued to lash our backs and a constant deafening stream of fridge sized blocks tumbled down the couloir to our left adding intensity to an already wild situation. As we gained height things calmed a little, a brief respite from the maelstrom of emotions of the last couple of days. The rock steepened and began to force us leftwards but we had the summit in our sights by this point. A traverse line led across to the fin connecting the Cappuccino to the main ridge so we gratefully left our heavy bags there and hastily made a start up the final pitch to the summit. Sadly what we assumed would be an easy romp turned out to be a gaping, smooth sided chimney coated with verglass, about six feet wide, utterly unclimbable. We traversed back to the right and tried a different feature, yielding similar results we were forced further rightwards along a hand traverse line leading towards a possible line of weakness. After a belay and a couple of deep breaths this led to the routes final defence, a gruesome slot chimney which required massive effort for incremental advances and kept things in doubt until grateful legs straddled the sharp summit crest. By this time the clouds had reconvened, allowing us a brief glimpse of Waddington’s mighty spire before engulfing us completely. We savoured a few moments but the

approaching dusk forced us back into the real world and a few quick abseils reunited us with our bags.



(Mount Waddington through the clouds)

Our hopes of finding a comfortable sheltered bivi spot were quickly downgraded to anything which got us out of the cruel wind. After a bit of searching we found something that would just about do, a few minutes of tumbling boulders down into the abyss and, while not exactly comfortable, it provided somewhere we could shovel some noodles into our depleted bodies and collapse for the night.



(Pete feeling "refreshed" after the cold second bivi)

We awoke to a cold, aching morning, a deep haze had settled over the range, not thick enough to be called cloud, but enough to slow the effects of dawn. Creakily we got through our morning routine and made a start. The unknown weighed on us heavily, desperately hoping that the fin would not terminate in a dead end. We moved together for a few rope lengths along a stunning knife edge ridge which we were in no mood to appreciate, until we reached a complicated series of towers which guarded the notch. We made several efforts to negotiate these with an increasing hint of desperation, until eventually we managed to find our way to a point where we could make a diagonal abseil into the notch. This felt like the biggest moment of commitment, as soon as we pulled our ropes retreat could become extremely difficult.



(Looking back at the Grand Cappuccino)

Luckily the pitches out of the notch went without too much difficulty and suddenly we found ourselves blinking in the sunlight on the crest of the regular south ridge route, with only a few hundred metres of easy ground between us and the summit of Serra Il. After a quick eat, drink and caffeine boost we smashed to the summit where we sat luxuriating and enjoyed the view for a good while, the weather calm and warm and our spirits high. Neither of us quite able to believe we had made it, we let it soak in before beginning the arduous but relatively uncomplicated descent.



(Pete happy on the summit)

After many hours of slogging we began the final steep slope back to the campsite, where we were greeted with cheers and hot drinks from almost complete strangers. After such intense feelings of isolation over the previous few days the warmth of this simple gesture was almost too much.

Many thanks to The BMC, Alpine Club, First Ascent and Big Stone for supporting our expedition.

Notes

Anyone visiting the Waddington Range is highly recommended to get hold of the "Waddington Guide" by Don Serl. This has definitive information on all climbs done before 2003 as well as all other necessary information about climbing in the area. Below are a few notes on our personal experience of climbing in the range.

Travel

We approached our base camp at Sunny Knob via helicopter from White Saddle Ranch. Although lacking the adventure of approach on foot, this is the best and most popular way of accessing the range for those wanting to get as much climbing done as possible.

We reached White Saddle in about 10 hours of driving from Squamish.

Weather

We had mostly good weather for our two weeks in the range, with only one tent bound day. Temperatures were similar to those found in the Alps in summer. We took "Blizzard Bags" and synthetic insulated jackets as bivi gear. This proved to be sufficient.

Budget

International Flights	£1050	BMC	£750
Helicopter from White Saddle	£1820	Alpine Club	£500
Petrol from/back to Squamish	£80	Personal contributions	£2500
Food	£200		
Insurance	£600		
Total	£3750	Total	£3750

Route Description

Partners in Grime ED2 5.10+ A1 1500m (vertical interval)

FA Peter Graham, Malcolm Scott August 2012.

An integral. Taking in the start of the South Ridge of Serra 2, a new line on the Grand Cappuccino, and the unclimbed ridge behind the Grand Cappuccino.

Climb the south ridge to the notch behind the Phantom Tower. Very good bivi site north of the notch.

Make 2 abseils from the vicinity of the notch to reach the base of a chossy ramp line, which leads leftwards around to the west side of the Grand Cappuccino.

Grand Cappuccino:

Pitch 1-4: Climb the chossy ramp to reach a terrace below the clean rectangular SW face of the Grand Cappuccino.

Pitch 5-7: Climb cracks in the left arête of the SW face.

Pitch 6: Climb an offwidth to a ledge.

Pitch 7: Follow grooves to a ledge bellow an overhanging tower in the arête.

Pitch 8: Go up and left on flakes then easy ramps around on to the NW face.

Pitch 9: Go up to the base of an obvious chimney which all the way though the Grand Cappuccino.

Pitch 10: Climb up towards the chimney then cut right along a diagonal crack (easy aid) to reach a niche.

Pitch 11: Go carefully though the blocky overhang above the niche then follow grooves to a prominent cleft, which leads to the summit of the Grand Cappuccino.

Make 1 abseil off the north side of the Grand Cappuccino to reach the ridge behind.

Follow the crest of the ridge behind the Grand Cappuccino passing a couple of pinnacles with abseils to reach the notch above a loose icy gully.

Move right along ledges for about 20m from the notch then follow ramp systems up and left for about 4-5 pitches to reach the crest of the south ridge normal route. Follow this to the top of Serra 2.